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Fishing Perspectives

BY NANCY SOLOMON

Since the nineteenth century, a tradition of sport fishing has existed alongside the centuries-old traditions of harvesting fish for subsistence and commercial purposes. Local commercial harvesters worked as fishing guides, earning extra income by taking paying guests—typically from New York City—to historically productive fishing areas on Long Island and in the Catskills, the Finger Lakes region, and the Adirondacks. When not working as guides, the same fishermen continued to harvest commercially valuable fish that were shipped to markets or sold at local restaurants.

With the advent of recreational motorboats, which became popular and affordable after World War II, fewer recreational and sport fishermen needed the services of guides. As a result, commercial fishers and sport fishers drifted apart, despite their shared passion for catching fish.

Fast forward to 1986. In that year, the first restrictions on who could catch striped bass began, pitting the two groups of fishermen against each other. Bass limits remain a contentious issue for both groups. Since then the number of fishing restrictions has grown exponentially, affecting the commercial sector both statewide and nationally. After decades of debate among fishers, however, they are now finding common ground as the specter of “catch shares” looms on the horizon, and the debate over what constitutes sustainable fishing continues.

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) attempts to regulate how many commercial and recreational fishers can catch fish in federal waters. Begun on a pilot basis in New England and Pacific waters, the catch shares concept is simple: the government designates cooperatives to manage the quotas established by NMFS. If you do not join a cooperative, then you have minimal access for catching fish. The permits are distributed to the groups that bid the highest amounts, which frequently are large corporations and owners of more than one vessel. This effectively locks out small family fishermen, in the same way that agriculture subsidies go to the large agribusiness farms rather than small family farms.



One person who is directly affected by these new regulations is Captain Charlie Wertz of Freeport, New York. Charlie has been harvesting fish since the 1950s, learning the trade from other fishermen in Freeport. Working aboard the *Norseman*, he has caught fluke, flounder, squid, and other finfish a few miles offshore. Back when he started, Charlie could catch five thousand pounds of fish, selling his catch to local fish markets, waiting customers who sometimes go directly to his boat, and the Fulton Fish Market. In the early 1990s, his son Chuck, who occasionally accompanied his father while he was growing up, joined the crew full-time.

At first Chuck enjoyed the independence that comes with being a fisherman, but soon he found out that the government would be monitoring and restricting his livelihood. Although he continues to work on the water, he can no longer fish daily and often cannot keep much of what he catches due to size restrictions. Because of the high number of fishing boats working in New York waters, New York State fishermen face the toughest NMFS restrictions in the country, despite overwhelming evidence that out-of-state fishermen fish in New York and return home with their catch.

Last spring I attended a symposium where the new catch shares program was discussed

and analyzed. The results were sobering. According to the nonprofit organization Food and Water Watch, “The surf clam and ocean quahog fishery in the mid-Atlantic became so consolidated that one firm controlled 27 percent of the available quota.” There are a number of lawsuits challenging the catch shares program. New York senator Charles Schumer has also expressed concerns and is leading efforts to protect New York’s fishing industry from what many consider arbitrary quotas and policies that favor restriction over restoration.

As a result of these large issues, commercial and recreational fishers have united in their opposition and hope to prevent the institutionalization of this controversial program. So if you feel so inclined—as I do—write Senator Schumer and thank him for his efforts on behalf of New York’s fishermen. And last but not least, go fishing! ▼

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